

A HIKER'S
HANDBOOK
TO THE BEST*
TREKKING
SPOTS ON THE
CONTINENT
BY JIM GORMAN

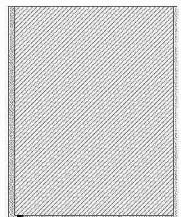
*NOTE: *No overhyped or overcrowded trails included*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PIETARI POSTI

GREAT NORTH *American* HIKES

'08

APRIL 2008 ► ADVENTURE 75



Weekend All-Stars

Art Loeb Trail | North Carolina

A PRESHRUNK APPALACHIAN TRAIL

Think of "The Art" as a freeze-dried Appalachian Trail: all the big savory morsels of the nation's premier long trail concentrated into a bite-size package. In its 30-mile course through Pisgah National Forest southwest of Asheville, the East's finest weekend trail loads up on 6,000-foot peaks and garnishes with sharp-shinned knobs, hardwood coves, monster climbs, and one of the best tree-free ridge walks in the region. "It's my favorite trail for its diversity and glorious views," says Jack Igelman, co-author of *Trekking the Southern Appalachians*. Christened after a local trail advocate, the Art Loeb reflects its namesake's passion for high, wild ridges. Beginning in lowland forest at Davidson River Campground, the trail quickly stair-steps to its high point, 6,214-foot Black Balsam Knob, and ends in Shining Rock Wilderness. The seven-mile section from Black Balsam to Deep Gap, just shy of Cold Mountain (yup, *that* Cold Mountain), crosses spacious balds that could double for the Scottish Highlands in *Braveheart*. There's a conspicuous absence of trees, and views unfold in every direction. Strong hikers can do the Art Loeb in two strenuous days, but three are preferable.

VITALS: Arrange car shuttles through Looking Glass Outfitters; \$60; lookingglassoutfitters.com. Pick up the Trails Illustrated Pisgah Ranger District Map; \$10; maps.nationalgeographic.com.



BEST APRÈS-HIKE SCENES

Long Trail Brewing Company
Bridgewater Corners, VT: Grab a seat on the deck and a pint of Long Trail Ale mere yards from the Appalachian Trail (longtrail.com).

The Nantahala Outdoor Center
Great Smoky Mountains, NC. The NOC is an outdoor institution, its café a magnet for hikers of all stripes (noc.com).

Two Medicine Grill
Glacier National Park, MT. Order a huckleberry milk shake and trade grizzly stories (whistlingswanmotel.com).

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Northern Loop | Washington

>Escape the gravitational pull of Mount Rainier's wildly popular Wonderland Trail to backpack the 36.6-mile Northern Loop, where you'll find a side of the eponymous national park that few even know exists. Here, dark old-growth forest gives way to an alpine zone where views stretch to far-off Mount Baker and Mount St. Helens. Elk graze the broad meadow at Grand Park, and the headwaters of the White River gather steam. **VITALS:** A wilderness camping permit is required; nps.gov/mora. For maps (\$10), visit maps.nationalgeographic.com.

Northville-Placid Trail | New York

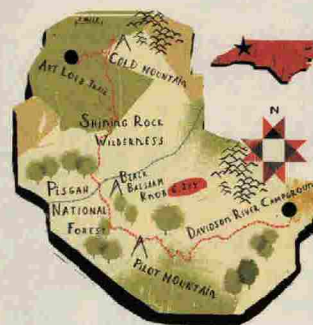
>Trust a hermit to know solitude. At West Canada Lake, the 133-mile Northville-Placid Trail through the Adirondacks reaches the remotest spot in all of New York: the haunt of early 20th century loner French Louie. On the 32-mile segment from Piseco to Wakely Dam, boots alight on balsam duff, loons call, moose browse, and the improbably sandy beach at South Lake invites a cooling dip. "It's the essence of the Adirondacks," says Jeffrey Case, author of *Adirondacks Trails: Northville-Placid Trail*. **VITALS:** For maps and info, contact the Adirondack Mountain Club; adk.org.

Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness | Montana/Idaho

>High in the Bitterroot Mountains, the raw granite pinnacles seen rising in every direction are so plentiful that many 9,000-footers go unnamed. Big Wild Adventures guides five-day explorations into the huge Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness on the Idaho-Montana border just southwest of Missoula, home turf to mountain goats, wolves, and the odd grizzly. "If you're looking for something every bit as rugged and spectacular as Glacier National Park minus the crowds, this is the place," says BWA co-owner Howie Wolke. **VITALS:** Big Wild Adventures; \$1,300 for a five-day guided trip; bigwildadventures.com



The Art Loeb Trail's unobstructed views



PHOTOGRAPHS, FROM LEFT: HARRISON SHULL/AURORA PHOTOS; SCOTT SPIKER

City Wilds

Forest Park | Portland, OR

A CASCADE EDEN IN A CONCRETE JUNGLE

Beavers, bobcats, and cutthroat trout aren't your typical city residents, but then Forest Park in Portland isn't your typical urban park. At 5,000 mostly forested acres, it's not the country's largest city green space (that honor goes to El Paso's 24,247-acre Franklin Mountains State Park). But Forest Park, an outpost of wild Cascadia just minutes by car or bus from downtown office towers, transports you into wilderness faster and more completely than any other park in the nation.

Instead of baseball diamonds and manicured lawns, Forest Park offers an untamed woodland of stately cedar, fir, and hemlock soaring above an understory of sword fern and huckleberry. Roughly 70 miles of trail weave through this Pac Northwest postcard, including the 30-mile-long Wildwood Trail, a favorite among hikers and runners for its easy grades and knack for locating



moss-covered beauty spots. "The north end of the park is where you'll find solitude, even on a weekend," says Stephen Hatfield, steward-

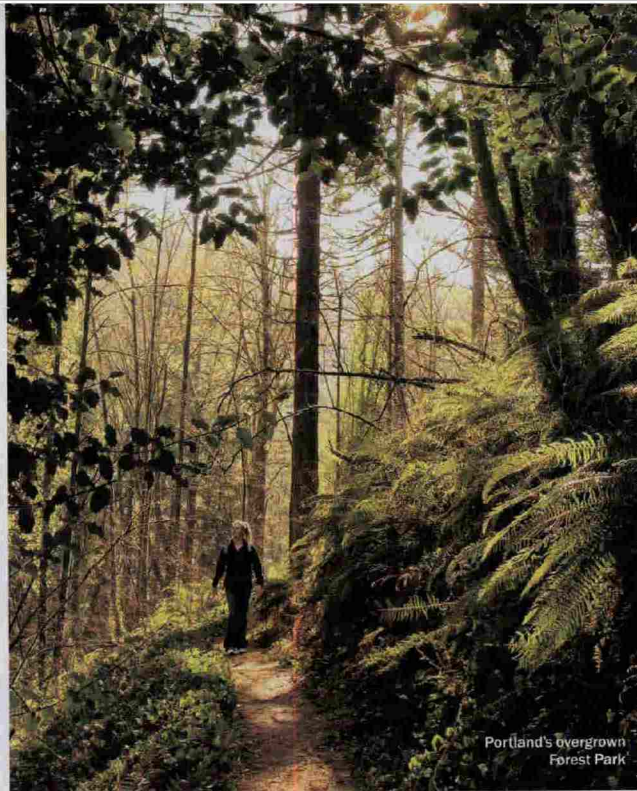
ship director of the Forest Park Conservancy. For an eight-mile hike that visits several seasonal streams, step onto the Maple-Wildwood Trail loop off Saltzman Road. Post-hike, ease your reentry into society by joining the trail-weary at nearby Lucky Labrador Beer Hall for a pint of rye ale and some chowder. **VITALS:** Forest Park Conservancy; forestparkconservancy.org; Lucky Labrador Beer Hall; luckyllab.com.

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Topanga State Park | Los Angeles, CA

>Located between Malibu and Beverly Hills, this 22-acre parcel of wildland may be the most valuable park in the country. But for now, no Hollywood mogul manses or rehab centers blight the prime real estate surrounding 2,126-foot Temescal Peak. Everyone hikes the seven-mile circuit from Trippet Ranch to Eagle Rock, which is why you should opt for the 14-mile out-and-back from Trippet up Hondo Canyon to Saddle Peak, with its meadows, stream crossings, and blockbuster views of the Pacific. The ten-mile backcountry trail will also lose any Winnie Chase-style entourage.

VITALS: For maps (\$9), visit tomharrisonmaps.com.



BEST TRAILHEAD TOWNS

Damascus, VA
 The best damn trail town in the country. Damascus is given over to hikers from May 16 to 18, when 25,000 descend during the Trail Days festival, a celebration of all things woody.

Steamboat Springs, CO
 Steamboat, a hiking town in ski resort guise, is a short drive from the Mount Zirkel Wilderness to the north and the Gore Range to the south; the Continental Divide Trail cruises past just east of town.

Munising, MI
 Surrounded by Hiawatha National Forest and adjacent to Pictured Rocks National Seashore, Munising is a hiker's Valhalla.

Wissahickon Valley Park | Philadelphia, PA

>Wissahickon Valley was once counted among the nation's industrial centers—but that was 250 years ago. Today nature has reclaimed this steep gorge in Philly's northwest quadrant. Set out on a seven-mile loop from Valley Green, heading to Bell's Mill Road on the Yellow Trail. Return on the Orange, Lavender, and White Trails on the other side of Wissahickon Creek. Expect small waterfalls, hemlock pockets, and quad-killing ascents. **VITALS:** For maps, visit fow.org.

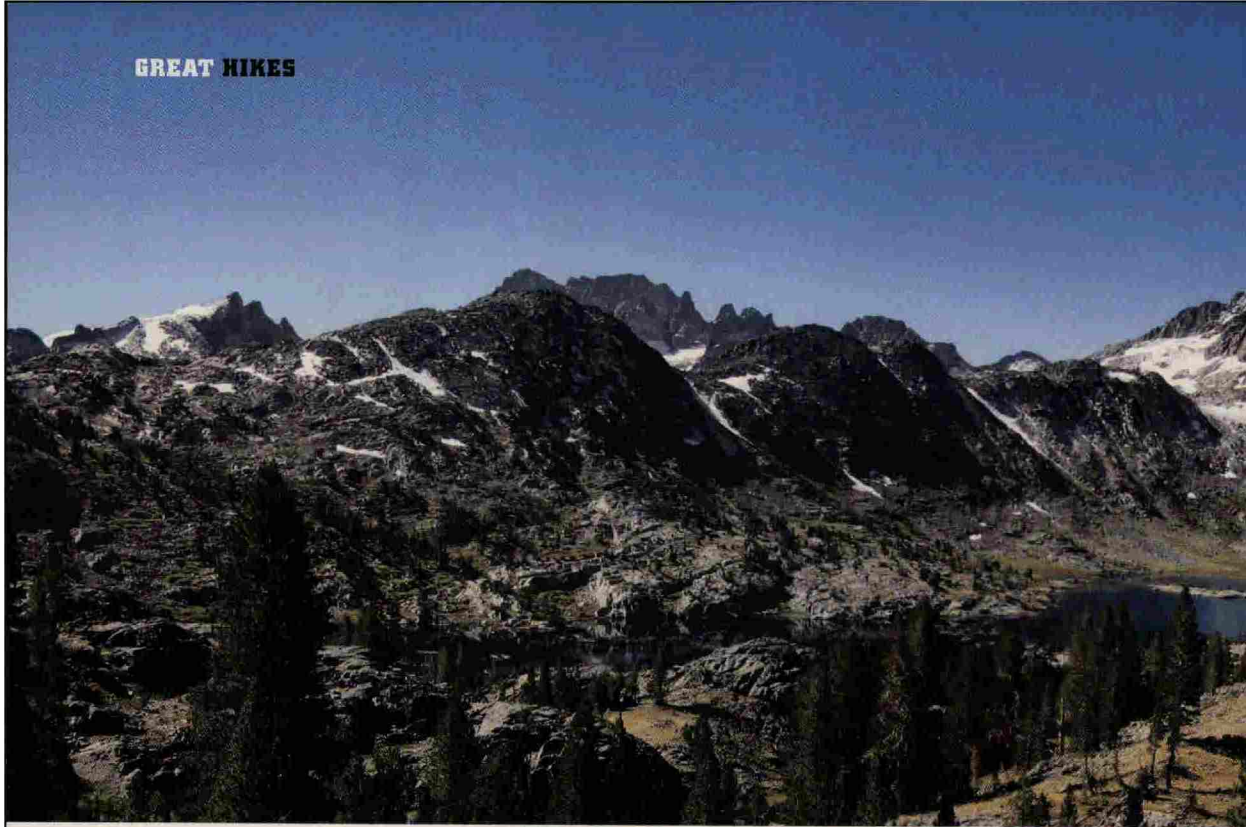
South Mountain Park/Preserve | Phoenix, AZ

>So big is South Mountain Park (16,500 acres to be exact) that its sun-blasted expanse contains not one but three mountain ranges. A well-designed network of trails explores rocky heights and cactus-speckled desert, anchored by the 14.3-mile-long National Trail, which runs the length of the park on a high ridge. **VITALS:** Get maps at the South Mountain Environmental Education Center; phoenix.gov/parks.

Eagle Creek Park | Indianapolis, IN

>How many city parks have backcountry? At Eagle Creek Park, the nation's 12th largest urban park at 5,200 acres, a reservoir separates the developed east side from the wild west, where no trails penetrate. Make that "official" trails. A spiderweb of unmaintained paths crisscrosses the forested ridges and ravines; it's here that Ed Wright leads a weekly eight-mile hike for the Indianapolis Hiking Club. **VITALS:** Indianapolis Hiking Club; indyhike.org

GREAT HIKES



Classics Made Easy

John Muir Trail: Ritter Range | California

THE JOHN MUIR TRAIL IN ONE-TENTH THE TIME

Every backpacker dreams of someday hiking the John Muir Trail, that 211-mile-long pageant through the High Sierra from Mount Whitney to Yosemite Valley. Rightly so. The JMT traverses some of the finest alpine scenery in the U.S. But until the ol' vacation account accrues 17 days (that's the length of an average JMT thru-hike), content yourself by sampling one of the trail's best and most accessible sections on a weekend-length, 31-mile route into the Ritter Range. Even if you don't know the Ritters by name, you've seen their stony facades on calendars and posters, especially the shark-tooth Minarets. "There's nothing like the Minarets elsewhere in the Sierra. They're dark and intimidating, especially on a cloudy day," says David Roberts, who leads weeklong backpacking trips into the Ritters for the Sierra Club. Your tour begins at Reds Meadow near Mammoth Ski Area, where you pick up the JMT northbound to Shadow Lake. Leaving the JMT, walk west to camp at Ediza Lake, which reflects the 17 Minaret spires. At this point you face a no-lose decision. Backpackers with off-trail know-how can proceed south to Cecile Lake, where the trail ends and the ad hoc Sierra High Route takes over. The less experienced should double back at Ediza Lake to rejoin the JMT to the junction with the Pacific Crest Trail. Follow the PCT southeast to Agnew Meadows, where you can catch a free shuttle bus to your car. **VITALS:** The Sierra Club; \$565 for a seven-day guided hike; sierraclub.org. For wilderness permits, visit fs.fed.us/r5/sierra.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTIN WIERZBICKI



The John Muir Trail's mind-bending mountainscape

Long Trail: Inn-to-Inn | Vermont

>Civilization is never far from the Long Trail, at 78 years old the granddaddy of all long-distance routes. You can opt to avoid society altogether by hiking the crest of the Green Mountains, but you'd only be creating the illusion of true wilderness. Instead, embrace the idea of civilized wilds on a five-day, guided, inn-to-inn hike on the LT from Stratton Mountain to Killington Mountain with Extreme Adventures of Vermont. By day you'll hike between ten and 15 miles, carrying a light pack around moosey bogs and up rocky Mount Tabor and other New England summits. By night you're shuttled to picturesque B&Bs, like 200-year-old Rowell's Inn in Andover. You're in luck if you arrive on a Friday or Saturday evening, when innkeeper Michael Brengolini serves platters of grilled meats slathered in his "Mad Mike's" barbecue sauce. **VITALS:** Extreme Adventures of Vermont; \$975 for a five-day guided hike; extremeadventuresvt.com. For maps, visit greenmountainclub.org.

Arizona Trail: Superstition Wilderness | Arizona

>Still in its infancy—57 of its eventual 800 miles from Mexico to Utah have yet to be completed—the Arizona Trail is destined to enter the pantheon of great long-distance routes. Variety is its big selling point, and in few other places is that displayed more vividly than on an 18-mile loop into the Superstition Wilderness east of



BEST LONG TRAILS YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

The Pacific Northwest Trail
 The PNT is a 1,200-mile game of high-country connect-the-dots between Glacier and Olympic National Parks (pnt.org).

The Superior Hiking Trail
 This 205-mile surf-and-turf special skirts the edge of Lake Superior into the Boundary Waters (shta.org).

The Grand Enchantment Trail
 The Southwest's most stunning hike: 12 wilderness areas, 14 mountain ranges, and 730 miles of desert.

Phoenix. "You'll hike from chaparral and canyon country up to meadows, through lush riparian areas, and eventually reach alligator junipers so big it takes three or four people linking hands to reach around," says Eric Hiser, an AT volunteer. From Rogers Trough Trailhead, follow the AT to Reavis Ranch, an abandoned homestead whose well-watered apple trees still bear fruit. The route then veers east while you continue north to pick up the Frog Tanks Trail. Follow it into a deepening canyon, then up and into grassy Angel Basin. The Rogers Canyon Trail returns you to the trailhead. **VITALS:** Tonto National Forest; fs.fed.us/r3/tonto

Colorado Trail: La Garita Wilderness | Colorado

>La Garita Wilderness in southwest Colorado is something of a state secret, known only to peak-baggers climbing 14,019-foot San Luis Peak and the few thru-hikers who attempt the Colorado and Continental Divide Trails each year. (They share the same corridor for 29 miles through the wilderness.) "It's gorgeous country—everything from low-elevation grasslands to high-alpine tundra—but there's nobody out there," says Chris Szczech, co-owner of Colorado Mountain Expeditions, which leads supported treks into the wilderness on behalf of the Colorado Trail Foundation. A traverse of the wilderness from Eddiesville to Spring Creek Pass on the Colorado Trail takes hikers on a sustained alpine ridge walk with enormous views north to the Elk Range and south to the San Juans. **VITALS:** Colorado Mountain Expeditions; \$925; coloradotrail.org/treks.html

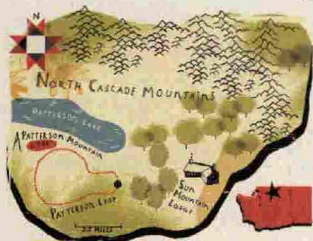
GREAT HIKES

Base Camps

Sun Mountain Lodge | Washington

"ANOTHER BOTTLE OF ICICLE RIDGE CHARDONNAY!"

Your house would look something like this if you'd bought Microsoft at \$8 a share. At every vantage—dining room, heated pool, outdoor hot tub, and guest rooms—the massive, snow-flecked North Cascade Mountains dominate. It's like catnip for hikers and one reason why Sun Mountain Lodge is perhaps the country's finest hiking lodge. The elegant, unfussy restaurant serves thoughtful dishes prepared from artisanal meats and produce grown regionally. (Consider the Icicle Ridge Chardonnay a post-hike muscle relaxer.) Keeping things grounded is the resort's extensive outdoor program, including 40 miles of hiking and biking trails that originate at the lobby door. Start with the loop hike to



Patterson Mountain, a seven-mile round-trip that rewards with a 360-degree view of the Cascade Mountains and the Methow Valley below. Not to be missed is the Maple Pass Loop at Rainy Pass, eight miles of nonstop glaciers and jagged peaks an hour's drive from the lodge. "Mile for mile," says Kevin Van Buren,

the lodge's in-house hiking consultant, "it's one of the most beautiful hikes in the North Cascades." And that's saying something. **VITALS:** \$160; sunmountainlodge.com

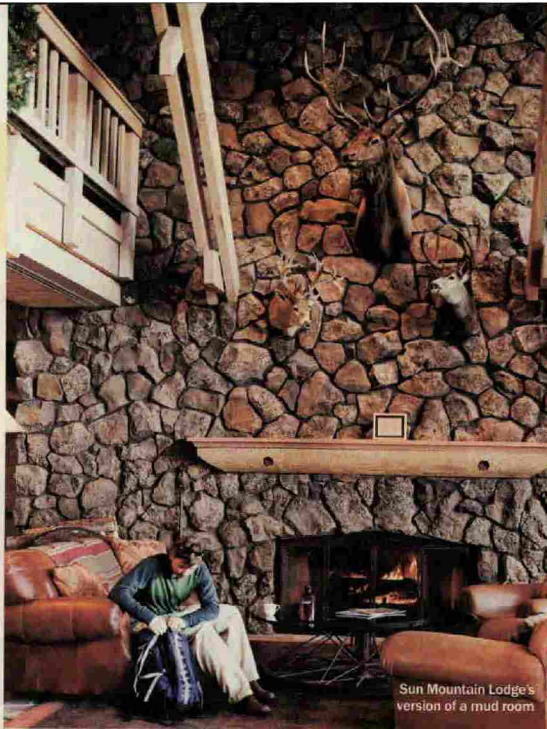
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Big Meadows Lodge | Virginia

>President Herbert Hoover, though no economic whiz, was wise enough to escape sweltering D.C. for the cool crest of the Blue Ridge on summer weekends. Hoover's fishing getaway, Rapidan Camp, still stands just a short distance by trail from Big Meadows Lodge in Shenandoah National Park. Check in to the refined, vintage retreat (circa 1939)—request a view of the Shenandoah Valley—then lace up the boots: It's off on a 7.4-mile circuit that stops by Hoover's digs. Use the Mill Prong, Laurel Prong, and Appalachian Trails to complete the loop. **VITALS:** \$72; visitshenandoah.com

Mohonk Mountain House | New York

>Gilded Age meets Gore-Tex Era at Mohonk Mountain House, which has been in the business of turning people on to the outdoors for 139 years. All turrets, towers, and gables, and clinging to a rock outcrop directly above crystal-blue Lake Mohonk, the Victorian hotel could pass for Bavaria's photogenic Neuschwanstein Castle. Despite room rates that might astound a Carnegie (peak room price: \$1,600), the vibe is relaxed. A rich portfolio of hiking (85 miles total) has something to do with it. **VITALS:** \$480, including meals; mohonk.com



Sun Mountain Lodge's version of a mud room



BEST HIKE-TO INNS

Charit Creek Lodge
Big South Fork
National River and
Recreation Area, TN.
It's all about options:
Hike in, bike in, or ride
a horse. Bunk in a
cabin or in the lodge.
Explore the highlands,
lowlands, and every-
where in between
(\$65; chantcreek.com).

Paradise Wilderness
Lodge
Rogue River, OR.
Hike 3.5 miles along
the salmon-stuffed
Rogue, lose cell recep-
tion, gain perspective,
and sleep in a soft
bed (\$155; paradiselodge.us).

Len Foote Inn
Dawsonville, GA.
At Len Foote, south-
ern hospitality means
Paula Deen-size
meals and access to
the best high-country
hiking in Georgia
(\$140 for two;
hike-inn.com).

Sorenson's Resort | California

>Set in the Sierra Nevada Mountains south of Lake Tahoe, Sorenson's Resort is a kind of hiker's dream town, containing 33 whimsical log cabins, chalets, and homes—a sod-roof Swedish cottage and a bungalow rescued from a defunct Santa's village among them—moved from elsewhere and rearranged here. Hikers can depart directly from the lodge into the surrounding national forest on Indian Head Trail or drive a short distance to unlimited options. In late summer try the six-mile round-trip to Round Top Lake from Carson Pass on Highway 88. Beginning at 8,573 feet, the trail wastes no time reaching timberline. Back at the resort, the café's beef burgundy and berry cobbler can elicit Proustian nostalgia. **VITALS:** \$115; sorensresort.com

Chisos Mountains Lodge | Texas

>One of the best panoramas in Texas, or anywhere else for that matter, lies at the midpoint of an aggressive 12-mile loop hike from Chisos Mountains Lodge up the Laguna Meadow Trail, where the view extends into Mexico. The lodge, in Big Bend National Park, sits in a mile-high realm of pines and trickling streams. Reserve well in advance to secure one of the Roosevelt Stone Cottages, six duplexes long on charm and privacy. Not up for a 12-miler? Far less demanding and no less scenic is the 5.6-mile stroll down Oak Canyon to the Window, a gunsight notch where a stream leaps out of view to the desert below. **VITALS:** \$99; chisosmountainslodge.com

PHOTOGRAPHS, FROM LEFT: MICHAEL HANSON; ROBERT J. KOZLOW

Hut-to-Hut Treks

Presidential Traverse | **New Hampshire**

THE HAUTE ROUTE, YANKEE-STYLE

Hiking, as our friends in New Zealand and the Alps have shown us, can be a civilized affair, with trekking infrastructure that affords sturdy abodes, comfy beds, and a fire-side cocktail at day's end. The best American knockoff of this strategy? The "Presi Traverse," a hut-to-hut rite of passage that crosses Mount Washington and the rest of the Presidential Range in the White Mountains. Eight full-service refuges run by the Appalachian Mountain Club dot this 19.8-mile high route (season starts June 4), freeing hikers from having to haul heavy camping gear and making side trips to the summits of the Northeast's biggest mountains a breeze.

(Adams, not touristy Washington, wins most ballots for favorite peak.) Lakes of the Clouds is the highest and largest hut on the trip, sleeping 90 in coed bunkrooms. Hope for clear weather, when views can extend to the Atlantic Ocean and up into Canada. But when a summer thunderstorm crashes these heights with special violence, be thankful for a warm refuge and a picture window to the show.

VITALS: Appalachian Mountain Club; \$79; outdoors.org/lodging/huts



MOST OVERHIKED TRAILS

(with alternatives)

Tuckerman's Ravine
 Mount Washington, NH. Hikers brave weather, crowds, and a road to the summit. **Alternate:** Tricky, empty Lion's Head Trail.

Mount Whitney Trail
 Inyo National Forest, CA. Everybody wants to be on top—of the highest peak in the lower 48. **Alternate:** View Whitney from nearby White Mountain Peak.

Bright Angel Trail
 Grand Canyon National Park, AZ. Some 800,000 hike just below the rim. **Alternate:** Go deeper and stay at Phantom Ranch (grandcanyonlodges.com).

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Wells Gray Huts | **British Columbia**

>The Wells Gray huts—three comfortable cabins sited a day's hike apart—constitute the only hut-to-hut hiking inside a park in western Canada. This would be a lamentable detail if the Wells huts weren't so spectacular. Each has views of subalpine meadows, the Trophy Mountains, or both. And with grizzlies and a number of wolf packs circulating outside, you'll be glad for the solid walls. Ian Eakins guides three- to seven-day hiking trips inside this 1.2-million-acre park in southeastern British Columbia. "Wells Gray lacks the name recognition of Jasper and Banff, but there's an unbelievable amount of wilderness that you can get into quickly," he says. **VITALS:** Wells Gray Chalets and Wilderness Adventures; \$705 for a five-day trip; skihike.com

10th Mountain Division Huts | **Colorado**

>Among skiers, the 10th Mountain Division huts need no introduction. Less well-known is that the same luxurious-for-the-wilderness cabins also thrill hikers. With 25 summer huts arrayed in three distinct systems, the route-building options are limitless. (Summer season begins July 1.) Our recommendation: a four-day trek into the Sawatch Range that jumps from Polar Star to Peter Estlin to Harry Gates huts. The route covers 28 miles, but your mileage won't be your priority when hanging out on a cabin deck, savoring the alpenglow on surrounding mountains. **VITALS:** 10th Mountain Division Hut Association; \$28; huts.org

La Grande Traversée | **Quebec**

>La Grande Traversée in Canada's Shick-shock Mountains is North American hiking at its most exotic. French is spoken in the Alps-style chalets, which line the International Appalachian Trail as it forges 63 miles through Gaspésie National Park. The peaks themselves seem to hail from far off. Though diminutive even by New England standards, the loaf-shaped summits rear well into a subarctic zone where trees all but disappear, caribou graze, and the snow-pack lingers sometimes into August. By using the park's shuttle-bus system, hikers can arrange two- to six-day treks back to their vehicles. Fully equipped huts sleep eight to 16, and for an extra fee food supplies can be dropped ahead. **VITALS:** Gaspésie National Park; \$22; sepaq.com/pq/gas/en

Hut-hopping in the Presidentials



Off the Beaten Path

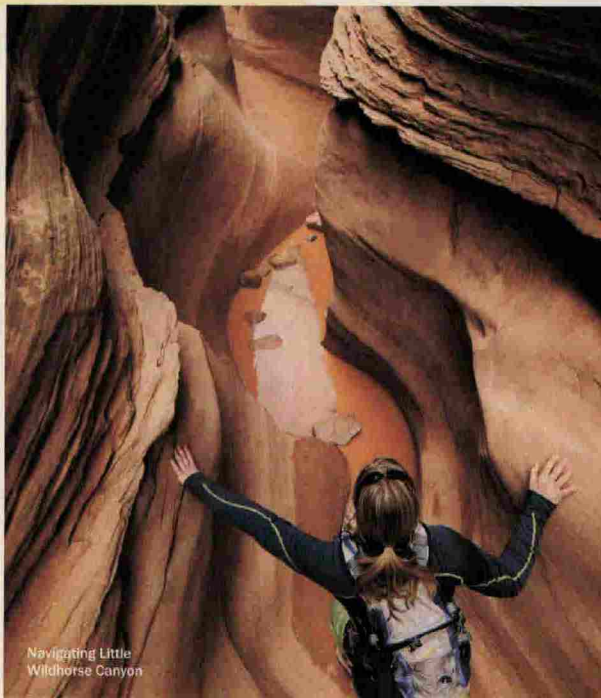
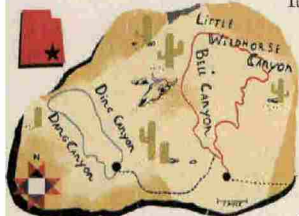
Little Wildhorse Canyon | Utah

THE TRAIL INTO RED-ROCK MOUNTAIN

On most hikes the objective is to stand atop a mountain. At Little Wildhorse in the San Rafael Swell of central Utah, you walk into one. The trail follows a twisting course through arguably the most beautiful slot canyon in the Southwest, no ropes or harness required. Inside the shoulder-width seam powerful erosive forces have alternately buffed, fluted, fanned, and pocked the red Navajo sandstone walls. But for a few low obstacles to clamber over, the hiking is straightforward.

"It's a great place for that first canyon hike. I've seen parents do it with kids in carriers," says Tom Jones, author of the indispensable *Tom's Utah Canyoneering Guide*. Jones recommends linking Wildhorse with adjoining Bell Canyon to create an eight-mile loop that involves easy navigation between

the heads of both canyons. For a next-level hike, try nearby Ding and Dang Canyons, where "a little more athleticism and route-finding are required," says Jones. **VITALS:** *Tom's Utah Canyoneering Guide*; canyoneeringusa.com



Navigating Little Wildhorse Canyon

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Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park | Florida

>Waist-deep in a slough inside Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park, the temptation is to look down. (The park is inhabited by alligators and snakes, after all.) But biologist Mike Owen directs your attention overhead to the garden of bromeliads and 44 varieties of orchids spilling from the trees. "Travel by braille," is how Owen describes a slogging tour into the park, where participants feel their way over submerged logs and around cypress knees using trekking poles. The slogging holy grail: the fabled Cathedral, a 100-yard-wide hothouse of epiphytes. **VITALS:** \$40 for a four-hour tour; floridastateparks.org



Custer State Park | South Dakota

>The bulls in Pamplona have nothing on the behemoth macho bison that inhabit the French Creek area of Custer State Park in the Black Hills region of South Dakota. Give them—and any buffalo you encounter—wide berth. Fifteen hundred strong, the park's free-ranging herd is one of the largest in the country. Elk, deer, and bighorn sheep also abound on this 12-mile, one-way hike into the French Creek Natural Area. The terrain varies between open prairie, tight narrows, and a lush riparian zone where trout congregate in deep pools. No formal trail exists; just follow game paths and keep the stream in view. **VITALS:** sdgfp.info/parks

The Via Ferrata at Torrent Falls | Kentucky

>"Iron route," the English translation of *via ferrata*, hardly evokes the raw excitement of navigating a mountain trail along fixed ladders, bridges, and cables. Perhaps that's why the folks at Torrent Falls Scenic Resort in Kentucky stuck with the original. Clip on to the Via Ferrata's cable, then take off on a 3,400-foot traverse around a horseshoe-shaped cliff while suspended as far as 90 feet off the ground. You'll ascend a vertical to occasionally overhanging rock face using handholds and steel rungs, then slip behind a seasonal waterfall and cross a swaying suspension bridge. **VITALS:** \$32; torrentfalls.com



Ape Cave | Washington

>Ape Cave formed in a hurry when a channel of lava pouring from Mount St. Helens cooled and crusted over at the sides and top even as the molten flow inside continued. The result is a lava tube roughly 2.5 miles long, one of the more unique hikes in the Northwest or anywhere else. Choose the longer Upper Ape Cave if you have basic rock climbing or caving experience. Piles of large, sharp boulders block the way, and you must surmount Lava Falls, an eight-foot wall with less than obvious holds. Otherwise, opt for Lower Ape Cave. Same eerie darkness, same glistening moisture on black basalt, only shorter and easier. **VITALS:** fs.fed.us/gpnf ▲

PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE TITTEL